

Our declining fauna provokes a diversity of responses

The recurrent observation that the fauna of Australia is declining has provoked a diversity of responses, one of the most prominent being that it is the task of zoologists to document the retreat of the fauna in the face of a growing human population and the ensuing loss of habitat. A striking example is presented in this edition by Allen Keast, whose concerns for birds are repeated for frogs (in the papers by White and by Greer) and for mammals (in Ellis' paper).

Keast discusses earlier ornithologists in a way that enhances their work. In doing so he has made a remarkable contribution himself, so even if you are not an ornithologist there is much you will enjoy about his papers, including the insight into Keast himself. Building up an egg collection is no longer an acceptable way for a young zoologist to begin a career but that is how Allen Keast began, in and around Sydney, in the 1930s. His enthusiasm remains boundless. When he returned the page proofs he attached a minor appendix. By this time the journal had already been laid out and the only vacant space left was in the second page of the spot reserved for this editorial. Consequently, I tapped away at the delete button and Botany Bay Foreshores Revisited appears on page 2.

Now a professor in Canada, Allen Keast visited Australia recently and commented on changes he had noticed in the birds of Sydney since he first started studying them in the 1930s. It was evident that he was carrying a lot of information, some on paper, some in his head, about the birds of Sydney and the people who had studied them over the last 50 years. It sounded fascinating, so I urged him to contribute this information to the public arena. The result is the three papers in the present edition, which together give us a unique picture of the birds and the ornithologists in the Sydney of half a century ago. The hut which Allen Keast worked in as a young ornithologist is featured on the front cover, and it is a great pity that one of the historical buildings of zoological history was destroyed by vandalism in the 1940s.

The first paper is a historical account of the birds of the Sydney region as they were, but Keast has done something that perhaps only he could do; he offers an eye-witness comparison of the birds as they were then and what he saw recently. Friendliest of the three articles is the middle one, in which the author reminisces about the ornithologists of those days, including himself, and their quirks of character. However, do not mistake this article for the ramblings of anecdote; there is solid zoology here as well as pleasure for those who read between the lines. The third article contains a remarkable revelation. The author was entrusted with an irreplaceable but only partly systematic set of data made by a former ornithologist who was never able to codify it. All the

old ornithologists knew that this work ought to see the light of day; decades passed and it never did. Again, Keast himself was probably the only person capable of carrying out the task. (I wish to thank the many people who have assisted in bringing Keast's articles fully up-to-date, including many taxonomic changes and the identification of the vegetation.)

A different response to the problem of our declining fauna is that of legal activity and policy change. The two papers by Graham Pyke provide good examples. Just as this edition goes to press the New South Wales Parliament passed the *Threatened Species Conservation Act* 1995, which gives expression to public concern about our fading fauna. Its significance will emerge during 1996. Not only do Pyke's papers provide a rare published record of the workings of the first piece of New South Wales legislation to deal with threatened fauna, but its interpretation by an ecologist will also contribute to future interpretation of threatened species policy. (On a minor note, this new Act transposes the terms "endangered" and "threatened" from the preceding legislation, i.e., the one referred to in Pyke's papers. "Threatened" becomes the umbrella term and "endangered" becomes the category of highest concern in line with common usage.)

Another response is the increasing recognition of the important role of survey. Competent statements by zoologists of the presence of animals in specific locations is a vital element in the development of any biodiversity strategy and is an essential benchmark against which to measure change. Consequently, the *Australian Zoologist* encourages survey papers, such as those by Read on the fauna of the floodplains of the lower Darling and Schulz and de Oliveira on the bats of Kroombit Tops, which appear in this edition.

The review of scientific literature ensures a continuing focus on the problem of our declining fauna. While reviewing is a regular task of any journal editor, the process need not stop there. Pat Hutchings' comments on John Whitehouse's major review of the management of the Great Barrier Reef is a splendid example of an open, independent and critical review process. Australians can now be more confident that the Great Barrier Reef is being intelligently managed because the management authority is exposed to independent review. There is a strong case for more of this sort of writing and the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales actively promotes this through the Whitley Awards for the best zoological books of the preceding year. The 1995 awards are reviewed in this edition. The reviews are relevant to working zoologists in a diversity of disciplines. We think they are a good read. We hope you do.

Daniel Lunney, Editor